

Anil Sadgopal on Obaid Siddiqi

By [nagarjun](#) | June 30, 2021

Late Prof. Obaid Siddiqi: Personal Memoirs

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Memoir No. 1 (687 words)

It was sometime towards the closing months of 1967. I was struggling round the clock at CalTech (California Institute of Technology, Pasadena) to finish my PhD research and submit my thesis. I had already taken a bit too long to do this. Late Dr. Pushpa M. Bhargava, Founder-Director, Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology (CCMB), Hyderabad was visiting Prof. James Bonner, my PhD guide. Prof. Bonner asked him: "Would you like to meet an Indian student doing PhD under me?" My lab was adjacent to Prof. Bonner's lab. Dr. Bhargava walked into my lab and introduced himself. He asked me about my plans after finishing PhD (then about 6-7 months away). I said: "I would go back to India but do not know where." He offered to introduce me to Prof. Obaid Siddiqi, saying, "TIFR, Mumbai is by far the best place in the country for Molecular Biology. Obaid's leadership has made it an inspiring place for the young people to pursue ideas that excite their imagination." I was well aware of Obaid's then internationally renowned work on 'nonsense' mutations. On his return to India, Pushpa wrote a letter to Obaid about his meeting with me at CalTech. A couple of months later, I received a formal letter from Obaid, written in a personal ('Dear Anil') style, inviting me to join the Molecular Biology Unit, TIFR as a Fellow, after my PhD. I agreed spontaneously and speeded up my work to wind up thesis writing. In early 1968, I appeared for my PhD viva-voce and left for India shortly thereafter. The next thing I knew that I was asked to pre-visit TIFR to deliver a talk based on my PhD thesis to the Molecular Biology faculty and research scholars. This meant travelling by train from Delhi (where my parents lived) to Mumbai without reservation. I undertook the journey literally standing for 24 hours in the packed compartment and that, too, in the May heat. I reckon that this invited talk was the only 'test' I was asked to undergo to make sure that I am the right person. The talk at TIFR was in a very relaxed informal atmosphere as if I was talking to friends. The talk was followed by 'free for all' questions. I recall Obaid inquiring, "Anil, why did you not take the

next obvious step to reach a finer understanding of the precise role of histones in DNA replication? It looks like that you just stopped when the next exciting and decisive step was so obvious to you.” I responded, “I would have done that had you not invited me to join TIFR in such a friendly manner. I was more excited to come back home and join your team!” Everybody laughed and I passed my ‘test’. Someone asked “When would you join us?” I told them, “After my wedding in Delhi later this month.” Obaid invited all of us for a cup of coffee in the West Canteen to celebrate my forthcoming wedding. I was to discover later that 2 TIFR’s West Canteen was the legendary space where inspiring and unbounded scientific dialogues took place, leading to path-breaking research projects, not just in science but also in education and social action. After another month, I formally joined TIFR in June, 1968. I don’t remember even applying for this job! Later, Obaid told me that he had presented Pushpa’s letter about me in the TIFR faculty committee meeting chaired by the then Director Prof. MGK Menon, the renowned physicist. This was adequate. Prof. Menon asked Obaid to proceed ahead. That was it! Whither India’s defamed bureaucracy: No signs of it at least in TIFR in late 1960s! Of course, this method of democratic functioning based on trust and mutual respect, rather than on outdated bureaucratic rules, was missing in most of the country. I learnt from the senior scientists at TIFR that the seeds of this open-ended transparent ambience were sown by the Late Prof. Homi Bhabha who was invited by the then visionary PM Jawaharlal Nehru in 1946 to start laying the foundation of nuclear science in India, even before the formal independence. Memoir No. 2 (423 words) Within a couple of days of joining TIFR in June 1968, Obaid invited me and my wife, Mira, for dinner at his house. He and his wife, Asiya, welcomed us as friends without the remotest hint that I was the junior-most faculty in the Molecular Biology Unit founded by Obaid himself in 1962. On the dinner table, Asiya announced that only vegetarian dishes had been served since Obaid told her in advance that we were both vegetarians. Both of them were deeply interested in our respective personal backgrounds. They were keen to know why we decided to move to India despite Mira being a born US citizen (who acquired Indian citizenship a few years later) and we could have comfortably settled in US, like most of the Indians end up doing after PhD. It was in this conversation that I revealed my intention to Obaid for the first time to shift to a rural area ultimately with a view to experiment with the Gandhian Nai Taleem (New Education) model of rural development. Mira told them about her decision to acquire MBBS degree in Mumbai with specialization in rural health and join me later. This plan of ours naturally intrigued them. Obaid particularly probed me about my perception of the Gandhian

vision of Nai Taleem and its continuing relevance to India. I was amazed at Obaid's deep understanding of the Gandhian philosophy, especially in the context of education. He had studied Gandhi's original writings extensively, far more than I had. Not once I felt that I was talking to one of the greatest scientific minds in the world of his times. He appeared instead to be a social scientist with philosophical orientation, referring to the contribution to social transformation made by various thinkers, saints, fakirs and Gurus in the history of India, from the time of Buddha onwards. I could not but be tempted to inquire how and when was he initiated in studying such literature. He smiled and said, "Of course, my father at Aligarh initiated me who himself was a scholar of Indian history and had a vast collection of such books." We returned to our home with a feeling that Obaid and Asiya represented the finest of the India's traditions of secular and composite culture. At the same time, it seemed to me that Obaid did not reckon that I was really serious about shifting to rural work and might not continue at TIFR for too long. He had to wait for almost three and a half years for this shock. Memoir No. 3 (792 words)

Obaid's Office as Head, Molecular Biology Unit was on the same floor as the office rooms of his faculty colleagues like me as well as the spacious laboratory equipped with the latest research facilities. Next to his Office was a modest meeting room with an oval shaped table. He would often walk to the laboratory to speak with the faculty colleagues and the young research scholars, inquiring as a curious colleague into the status of the various experiments, proposing new hypotheses and leaving each of them with questions and ideas to ponder over. One could often see him pulling a stool near the lab table and discussing the data. None of us ever felt that we had been visited by a Boss. Instead, when he left after a discussion, there was a feeling that we have been enriched and some new paths have been opened up for exploration. Similarly, he would also peep into our office rooms and inquire politely whether he can come inside for a discussion. About a month after my joining TIFR, he visited me in my office room on a forenoon. He wanted to know if I had made up my mind on the area of research I would pursue and what additional facilities I may require. I explained to him how I had planned to pursue the questions that were not resolved in my PhD work at CalTech. These related to the role of histones (a component of chromosomal proteins in humans) in DNA replication, including the question he himself had raised after my invited talk in early May. I handed over to him a write-up on my proposed research plan. This research would call for, I informed him, a separate room as a Human Cell Culture Lab and would need help from TIFR's workshop to construct the specialised Cell Culture Equipment designed by me. He asked me to visit him in his office the next morning with a budget estimate. Next morning, he told me that his Secretary is

already engaged in providing for a separate room for the Cell Culture Laboratory on the same floor and had also spoken with the Manager of the Workshop in the basement to allocate the required lathe machine and technicians for constructing the Cell Culture Equipment. A written request for this purpose along with my design and budget estimate would be sent to the Workshop 4 Manager on the same afternoon, with copy to the TIFR Director's Office. Finally, he suggested that I go to the basement and meet the Manager and get the construction work started. I just could not believe that all this would be so simple in a government-funded institute. Even CalTech would have taken more time. As I was walking out of his Office, he said, "I hope you realize that yours would be India's first human cell culture Lab! You now have to carry forward your research to fulfill its objective." Feeling the weight of this moral responsibility, I wondered about its implications for my plans to quit TIFR three years later and shift to a rural area. The TIFR Workshop turned out to be an amazing space for engineering work of the highest quality. The whole floor was covered with modern machinery and young technicians busy on their respective machines. The Manager introduced me to a young technician hailing from a village in Western Maharashtra and asked me to discuss my design with him. The young technician started the work on the lathe machine without delay but was keen to know what the proposed machine was meant for. When I explained the purpose, he realized that he was on to something of great significance and felt it a privilege that he was allocated the task. Within a month, though with some glitches, the Cell Culture Lab was ready and my research work was on its way! In the process, the lathe technician and I became friends. He soon found out that my long-term interest lay in shifting from TIFR to villages and work for rural development. He invited both me and my wife to his village so that we get acquainted with agriculture. We accepted the invite happily. I informed Obaid of this development too. He was beginning to see signs that I was serious about my intention which I had shared with him and his wife over the dinner at his home. Being a wise administrator of research, he assigned a PhD scholar and a Research Assistant to work with me and learn the intricacies of the Human Cell Culture Lab. Obaid's foresight was invaluable. The facility created by me continued to function and be utilized even after I resigned from TIFR in December 1971 and moved to Hoshangabad Distt. in Madhya Pradesh. Memoir No. 4 (611 words) It was in early 1971 that I approached Obaid with great hesitation and self-doubt. By this time, the spade work for the rural program based on the Gandhian Nai Taleem model of education was in fairly advanced stage, though most of it still on paper and in our core team's collective mind. The core team of volunteers and supporters from Maharashtra (Mumbai and elsewhere),

Gujarat (Distt. Surat and elsewhere) and Madhya Pradesh (Distt. Hoshangabad) was beginning to take shape. A Society had been registered in Mumbai in November-December 1970 under The Societies Registration Act, 1860 as well as under the Bombay Public Trust Act, 1950. Donations were being collected from friends and well-wishers from various parts of the country. The news of this endeavour somehow reached Late Prof. J. P. Naik, then Education Advisor to the Govt. of India and the Founder-Secretary of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR). Honestly, I was then quite ignorant of Prof. Naik's historic contribution to educational planning and policy-making (later he became my Guru and Kishore Bharati's patron). Prof. Naik wrote a letter to me at the TIFR address wherein he stated that he had come to know of my plan to institute a Gandhian Nai Taleem program in some rural area. Further, he wishes to talk to all the core members of the team since he had some crucial suggestions that need urgent consideration. The letter was followed up with a telegram asking for a date, time and the venue of the meeting so that he will schedule his flight from Delhi to Mumbai just to meet us. Someone in our core team knew of Prof. Naik and suggested that we should certainly accept his offer. This was my first contact in life with any person in the government of such seniority and access to official power. Our 20-member core team had people from different parts of Maharashtra and Gujarat, though most of them from Mumbai itself. Not knowing any venue that would be appropriate to meet Prof. Naik, I decided to speak to Obaid. After hearing this story, Obaid pointed out that Prof. Naik is doyen of Indian education and talked of his decisive role in Kothari Commission as its Secretary. He opined that there is every reason to accept Prof. Naik's offer. He readily offered the meeting room next to his office as venue for this purpose. When I wondered whether it is OK for holding such a meeting in an official space of TIFR, his response is worth recalling even half a century later. He said, "TIFR is an institution supported by government funds which means people's money. You are planning to do something for the welfare of the people and Prof. Naik, Govt's senior functionary and a visionary in his own right, is going to fly to Mumbai to discuss your plan. Why can't a government facility be used for this consultation? What else the government buildings are meant for, if not for acting for people's welfare? Go ahead and invite him. I will arrange for tea and some snacks at my personal cost. If you would prefer, I would welcome him formally and then leave you people with him." I had no words to thank Obaid. Nor did I then have any idea that a scientist of his stature and heavy engagements could entertain such thoughts though now I know of many scientists (and social scientists too) of similar social commitments. I would not hesitate today to assert that Obaid, a person with Insaaniyat,

was moved by thoughts and emotions similar to those of Albert Einstein who was as much a scientist as he was a socialist! 6 [Footnote: The meeting with Prof. Naik went on for three hours. While appreciating our commitment, he criticized our idea of setting up a campus for Nai Taleem model of development and pleaded that we drop the idea altogether. Instead he proposed that we set up a Rural University with the same purpose, rather than setting up an isolated Nai Taleem experimental model in a village. Lost in our dream and ill-informed enthusiasm, we completely failed to see the sense in Prof. Naik's proposal but we now know that he was speaking with insight in similar experiments all over the country, including Gandhi's own experiments. But this debate is not the focus of the present write-up and would be elaborated in Kishore Bharati's ongoing documentation.] Memoir No. 5 (935 words) Now, I come to the most precious part of my Memoirs of Obaid. It must have been towards the closing months of 1971. By then, our effort to procure 150 acres of the state government land in Distt. Hoshangabad to set up the rural campus had crossed major political hurdles. The ground work for initiating the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme (HSTP) in Madhya Pradesh government schools had also moved forward. A group of science faculty members from Delhi University and scientists like Prof. Yash Pal and Prof. V. G. Kulkarni from TIFR as well as two leading members of the All India Science Teachers Association had offered to contribute time and energy for HSTP. My wife, Mira, was engaged in the 3rd year of MBBS program at JJ Medical College, Mumbai. She told Kishore Bharati's core team, "Anil should not wait at all for me to finish my medical course and instead may proceed to become a full-timer with Kishore Bharati right away." Mira's bold decision gave me the confidence in December 1971 to resign from TIFR. Gathering all of my moral courage, I went to Obaid's office to hand over my Resignation Letter to be duly recommended and forwarded to the Director Prof. MGK Menon for approval. Being aware of the various stages of my steady preparation towards this point for the previous three and a half years, Obaid was not exactly shocked but indeed sufficiently disturbed. Offering a cup of coffee, he asked me to relax. He collected his thoughts for a few seconds and said what I could have never anticipated, "Look, according to our ancient culture, there are four stages of human life – Brahmacharyashram, Grihasthashram, Vanaprashashram and Sanyasashram. You, at the age of 31 years, are presently in the 2nd stage i.e. Grihasthashram when you are expected to fulfill your duties towards family life and also perform your social functions like being an active scientist. It is only when you are 50 years old that you would enter Vanaprashashram when you may cease to be part of your family life but spend your time and energy serving the

society until age of 75 years. Contrary to these ancient norms, you are escaping from your family life like being with your wife and bringing up children as well as fulfilling social duties like earning your bread and performing your role as a scientist for which society spent money on you. I would suggest that you postpone your resignation until you are 50 years old and then you can do what you have planned to do in Madhya Pradesh villages.” For a while, I was stunned and did not know how to respond. I asked him, “How do you know all this about the Hindu concept of four Ashrams.” He smiled like always, “I have told you before too that, while I was a child in Aligarh, my father engaged a Pundit to teach me Sanskrit.” The Pundit taught me about the four Ashrams. I also learnt Sanskrit reasonably well.” However, justifying my decision, I asserted, “I don’t want to wait until I am 50 years old when I would not have adequate energy to pursue the idea of translating the Gandhian concept of Nai Taleem for rural development. I want to give the best years of my life – physically, emotionally and intellectually – to fulfill this unfinished educational agenda of the Freedom Struggle. If my physical health would permit, I would definitely continue to work beyond the age of 50 years as well.” Before giving up, he tried another route, “Your wife is mid-way her MBBS Course. In addition to her living expenses like house rent, food and maid, she would have to pay her medical course fees as well. How would she manage all this when you won’t be earning anymore?” I shared our joint thoughts, “There is some saving from my CalTech fellowship. My parents also promised some help. This should suffice until she finishes her medical course and joins me at Kishore Bharati in Madhya Pradesh.” Obaid reluctantly gave up, “As wished by you, I will recommend your Resignation as a TIFR Fellow to the Director. The decision is up to him.” And then he added quickly, “I am sure you would handover the charge of the Human Cell Culture Lab to the Research Assistant and provide guideline for pursuing research to your PhD scholar.” I added, “Of course, I will do it and give you a written report too.” As I made moves to leave the room, Obaid stood up and wished me well, “Do let me know if I can be of any help in your work. Mira should feel free to contact us whenever she needs our help.” I left the room with tears rolling down my eyes. Here was a wonderful human being who built up the then finest Molecular Biology Lab which the whole country could be proud of. The team of brilliant and dedicated faculty members, PhD scholars and research assistants he put together and guided meticulously had no parallel then in Molecular Biology elsewhere in not just India but the entire South Asia as well. I would dare add that even CalTech had a lot to learn from Obaid in providing leadership in scientific research. Later, Obaid shifted his attention to research on behavioural neurogenetics and became the Founder-Director of the

National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS) at Bangalore under the aegis of TIFR. 8 Today, in particular, I salute his well-informed nuanced perception of India's history and culture and his unassuming and transparent way of life. But there is more to this story. Memoir No. 6 (360 words) A few days after submitting my Resignation from TIFR in December 1971, Obaid called me and asked me to note down a telephone number. He then told me that this is the telephone number of the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust. He had spoken to the Trust's Chairperson Prof. Rustom Choksi about me and my plans to work for rural education and development in Madhya Pradesh villages. Obaid suggested that I meet Prof. Choksi and it is quite possible that the Trust may support my work. Prof. Choksi turned out to be an unexpected persona sitting in a corporate office. He inquired into my background and the reason for resigning from TIFR and moving to Madhya Pradesh villages. I gave him a copy of our Project Report which he set aside and said I prefer to talk to you instead. Finally, he inquired about the kind of support we expect from the Trust. I asked him, "Can you support 5 workers @ Rs. 500/month for five years?" Bewildered, he asked, "Are you serious? How can anyone live in this frugal sum? Have you done your computation carefully?" I assured him, "Yes, we know what we are talking about. If you provide this support, we would have a nuclear team, including myself, that would lead Kishore Bharati's crucial initial years and set the tone for future years as well." He agreed despite his doubts and the support of Rs. 30,000/year came to us regularly not just for 5 years but until mid-1980s! In return, Prof. Choksi set a unique condition, "Once a year, whenever you visit Mumbai (then, Bombay), come and have a cup of coffee with me and tell me what all has happened in Kishore Bharati." I inquired whether we can send a written Report instead. He laughed and added, "That you may send to our Finance Office for their records." As far as I am concerned, he asserted, "I want to know your grassroots experience and what you are learning, directly from you." This is what I did once in a year at my convenience for the next several years. The coffee was invariably served with delicious Parsi cake! [Footnote: What more can I say about the deep sense of humanity (Insaaniyat) that characterised Obaid. I never even remotely hinted to him that we need any financial support. Yet, he was genuinely concerned. His credibility was so high in the world of science that one phone call from him was adequate to move the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust to ensure enviable support to us for more than a decade. There is much more to this story about Sir Dorabji Tata Trust's support. There were serious ups and downs too but that has nothing to do with Obaid. All this would be recorded and analysed in the ongoing Kishore Bharati's documentation.]

Memoir No. 7 (326 words)

In March 1972, the idea of HSTP was permitted to be introduced on a trial basis in 16 government middle schools (Class VI-VIII) of Hoshangabad District. Six years later in 1978, the state government agreed to expand the program to all the 280 middle schools of the District, along with major structural changes in the concerned administrative institutions as well. In 1979, we invited Obaid to visit the schools and meet the teachers of the Bankhedi Block (where the Kishore Bharati campus was located) and the adjacent Pipariya Block. He addressed 3 to 4 meetings of the teachers in two days either in open air or in government school/college Halls. The meeting at Kishore Bharati campus was under a large Neem Tree with 150 plus teachers drawn from the entire District. In each meeting, speaking in colloquial Hindi/Hindustani and using anecdotes, Obaid would explain 'What is science?' and the social implications of scientific temper. He would answer questions with such simplicity that no one could imagine that they were listening to a brilliant scientist of international repute. On average, each meeting would be attended by 150 to 200 middle school teachers. The government college in Pipariya insisted that he visit the college as well and speak to the teachers of both science and social science. Despite the stress of continuously addressing back-to-back meetings, he agreed to adjust the college request with his characteristic humility. He was a hit there too. There would be only handful of scientists in the country who could switch so comfortably from their high profile sanitized academic discourse in English to one in colloquial Hindi/Hindustani or other Indian languages. This can only happen if the scientist loves and respects the masses and has the passion to communicate science and explain its role in social transformation. The Bankhedi and Pipariya experience provided adequate evidence that Obaid had both love and respect for the masses and passion for science and scientific temper in abundance!

[I am tempted to record an interesting anecdote at the meeting with teachers held on the Kishore Bharati campus. Obaid was talking about the role of scientific temper in social interaction. A lady teacher from the government girls school in the far away Hoshangabad town felt uncomfortable and pointed that such a stance may disturb some of the established cultural norms and lead to tension. Obaid smiled and politely said, " ("This is a matter of debate"). For some reason, the teacher heard 5 (debate') as (buffalo') and inferred that Obaid has called her (buffalo'), thereby insulting her! I intervened and explained to Obaid why the teacher is •so upset with tears in her eyes, Obaid addressed the teacher

directly “बहन जी, मैं आपको भैंस क्यों कहूँगार मैंने तो महज़ कहा था कि यह तो बहस का मामला है यानी इस पर और बात करने की जरूरत है चूंकि आपने अच्छा मुद्दा उठाया था। मैं आपके नज़रिए की इज्जत करता हूँ और आपको चोट पहुंचाने के लिए माफ़ी मांगता हूँ। (“Sister why would I call you a buffalo? I only pointed out that it is a matter that calls for debate and further discussion because you raised an important issue. I respect your viewpoint and tender my apologies for hurting you.” A wave of low-decibel laughter changed the tense mood of the meeting. The embarrassed teacher settled the matter हमें आपका लेक्चर बहुत पसंद आया। आप दोबारा आइएगा अगली बार हमारे स्कूल में। (We liked your lecture a lot. Come again but next time to our school). “The meeting ended with tea and the teachers, including the lady teacher, surrounding Obaid with plenty of bonhomie!]

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